

VEGETATION TREATMENTS PROGRAMMATIC EIS AND ER

FOR THE WESTERN U.S. AND ALASKA

PUBLIC HEARING

NOVEMBER 30, 2005

Present Were:

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Gina Ramos - BLM
Brian Amme - BLM

Carl Gossard
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BLM Utah State Office:

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AMME: Hello. Welcome to our public meeting for the National Vegetation EIS. My name is Brian Amme. I'm the project manager for this project, and there are a few people to introduce. I'll introduce Gina Ramos, the senior weed specialist from the Washington office. Most of you know her. She is the co-teamlead for this. And Stuart Paulus here is our project manager for ENSR International. He helped us write the EIS and put it together. Bud Gribble is the division chief for resources in the Washington office. And Carl Gossard is the assistant director of fire operations for Oregon and Washington. And a few others.

And I'd like to welcome you. I'm not sure if we have a lot of public here. I see there are a lot of agency folks here. For the agency folks, this will be more of a briefing on the project. And for any public that is here, this is an opportunity to make some comments on it if you so desire or to find out more about the project. We're more than happy to let you know, and after this is over if you have any questions, we can hopefully answer them. But at this point, I think I'll introduce Stuart for the Power Point presentation, and we'll go from there.

PAULUS: Thank you, Brian. I'd like to welcome you tonight to the Bureau of Land Management's public

hearing on the Vegetation Treatment Programmatic and EIS and also Environmental Report for the Western U.S. and Alaska. This is a little different than what you might see in a similar situation where you might have an EIS. We also have an Environmental Report that was done as part of this project. And if you go on the website or look at the CDs that were handed out out front, you will see there are a lot of other supporting documents that were done in this project.

We have several things we really want to accomplish tonight. First of all, to help you understand the BLM's proposal to treat up to six million acres annually in the Western U.S., including Alaska. Right now, the BLM treats about two million acres annually. So this is about a three-fold increase from the numbers that we are looking at right now.

Second, I'd like to explain the role of the Programmatic EIS and the Programmatic Environmental Report.

And finally, and probably most importantly, we'd like to solicit comments tonight from the public on issues of concern that you do not feel were adequately addressed in the EIS or ER or should have been addressed better or perhaps alternative proposals that should have been

considered that we did not consider.

The BLM was founded in 1946 with the goal of serving current and future publics and restoring and maintaining the health of the land. The agency administers nearly 262 million surface acres and about seven million acres of subsurface mineral lands, so a good chunk of land. Nearly all of the surface acres are in the Western U.S., including Alaska.

This map shows you where the BLM lands are primarily located. The surface lands, you can see the bulk of them are right here in the central portion of the Western U.S. However, even though Alaska looks a little small, and it doesn't look like there is a lot of land in Alaska, just because of the scale of the state, about 81 million acres are found in Alaska alone. So, in fact, Alaska has almost a third of the acres of public lands.

What is the BLM proposing to do and why? As I mentioned earlier, the BLM's primary objective is to treat up to six million acres annually in the Western U.S., including Alaska, using five primary treatment methods: Manual methods, mechanical methods, prescribed fire, use of herbicides, and also biological control methods. The reason that the BLM is proposing to do this and, in

particular, to increase the number of acres treated at the current levels is: One, to reduce the hazardous fuel loads found on range lands and forest lands managed by the BLM to reduce the risk of wildfires.

Due to fire exclusion practices over the last several decades, and perhaps maybe in the last century, the amount of hazardous fuels on range lands and forest lands have built up to very high levels. And the result is we've had a lot of big wildfires in the last decade or so, some very severe wildfires. Certainly, you are very familiar here with the Great Basin with the wildfire situation. This is something that the BLM is trying to rectify to the reduce hazardous fuels and reduce this risk of wildfire and especially the risk of wildfire to people living in what we call the Wildland Urban Interface, or the WUI, because of concern, obviously, over the loss of people and property when these wildfires are close to areas where people live.

Another major goal is to remove and control weeds. It is estimated that the weed population has grown about four-fold in the last 15 years. So it's obvious that at current treatment levels, we are not controlling weeds. Hopefully, if you increase the number of acres treated you have a better control of weeds and maybe at least stabilize

the population.

Another major goal and a reason for doing the project is to restore and rehabilitate damaged lands. Obviously, there have been a lot of wildfires in the last decade or two. These have resulted in a lot of damage and harm to the land. So a lot of the effort will be to try to restore and reclaim these damaged lands.

And finally, kind of the overall arching goal is to improve the overall ecosystem health, which also means improving water quality and habitat for fish and wildlife and all the other things that the land provides to people, including improving recreational values, visual qualities, and et cetera.

So there will be just a quick overview of the different treatment methods. The first one, the one that will be, at least on the western-wide basis, used most often is our mechanical treatment methods, including the use of mowers, bush hogs, generally larger, heavier equipment that can take care of vegetation over a fairly large area.

Prescribed fire is the second method, and the second-most common method. Again, setting fires to control hazardous fuels, perhaps to remove vegetation, and in some

cases, especially in Alaska, where the agency has identified areas that it would like to burn and set up a plan, if Mother Nature happens to set a lightening strike in that area and start a burn, the BLM will go ahead and burn the area within their management prescription. And in that case, we actually have a natural fire that is serving as a prescribed fire.

The next most common method would be the use of chemicals or herbicides. Here, you can see we are using a helicopter and an ATV to apply herbicides.

And finally the last and the least common method is the use of biological control methods. Biological control is basically using animals or pathogens to control vegetation. In this case, there are goats feeding along this creek here that are helping to contain vegetation. So you can use domestic livestock to contain vegetation. And there are also a number of insects that are used to prey upon vegetation. So you can use them to control vegetation and also a number of pathogens.

Excuse me, actually the least common method would be the manual control method. Here, you are using a chainsaw to take care of vegetation, but using hoes, shovels, things like that, basically manual labor.

Besides treating vegetation and increasing the number of acres treated, the BLM also, through this proposal, this process, has a couple of other things it is also trying to obtain.

One, a thing that was done as part of the EIS process was to evaluate the risk to humans, plants, and animals from using several new herbicides, and in particular, four new herbicides: Difufensopyr, diquat, fluridone, and imazapic.

Diquat and fluridone are primarily aquatic herbicides, difufensopyr and imazapic are terrestrial herbicides used in land situations.

So the first thing we had to do or wanted to do through process was look at the availability and the ability to use new herbicides. In fact, this is a part of the EIS process that probably took the most time. Several years were spent evaluating not only these four new herbicides but also some of the herbicides the BLM currently has available to it to get a better handle on the risk to humans and fish and wildlife. And especially in the last 10 or 15 years there have been a number of issues of concern related to (inaudible type of fish) in the Pacific Northwest and other fish species and wildlife

species throughout the west. So a lot of the effort was geared towards trying to determine the risks of using these different herbicides to fish and wildlife.

As part of this process, we also developed a protocol for conducting risk assessments. And the idea was to -- in the past, there was a protocol, but it was never very well established -- to work with the Environmental Protection Agency, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the NOAA, or National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, National Marine Fishery Service -- and those are the folks involved with the (inaudible type of fish) and other fish -- to establish a protocol from looking at these herbicides that we evaluated, but also herbicides that may come up in the future that the BLM would like to use, and developing a protocol that the BLM could then follow in the future to evaluate the risks and determine whether it was safe to use these herbicides. And this protocol is actually an appendix in the EIS, if you would like to look at it, or on your CD; it's there, also.

And then the long-term intent was, once this protocol was in place, to use it to hopefully or, you know, if the need arose, to be able to use new herbicides that might come up in the future that perhaps are more effective

and have less environmental impact than herbicides that are currently used.

And in this process not only was there looking at how you would look at the risk to humans and plants and animals but also in making sure that the public was adequately involved through the National Environmental Policy Act, or the NEPA process, to have a say in how this whole process works in making sure that they are able to comment on the uses of these proposed herbicides.

The role of the Programmatic EIS. Again, I mentioned we did an EIS and also an Environmental Report. The EIS fulfills the BLM's requirements, the Federal agencies prepare, and the environment impact statement and the proposed action has a potential for significant environmental impacts. When one thinks of the use of herbicides, generally you think there is potential for significant environmental impact.

So the primary driving force behind the EIS is the use of herbicides. And, in fact, the use of herbicides is the primary issue of controversy as identified during the scoping. The scoping was a process where we asked the public, and it was way back in late 2001, early 2002, where we asked the public, "What are the big issues that we

should be looking at when we think about vegetation treatments in the Western U.S.?" And the use of herbicides was a big issue that came up.

It was also the primary issue that was discussed or evaluated in the earlier EISs done by the BLM back in the late '80s or early '90s. So, again, herbicides have been the driving force behind the EIS.

The EIS, specifically, then, analyzes the effects to both natural and social resources from the use of herbicides currently available to the BLM in addition to the four herbicides that they evaluated as part of the EIS.

As part of the EIS process, we not only looked at sort of the BLM's preferred alternative of what they wanted to do, but we also looked to four other alternatives to try to determine which alternative might help the BLM meet their needs to control vegetation while also helping to protect the environment and also social resources.

Five alternatives were considered. The first one is Alternative A. Basically that's continue to do what we are doing today. Continue present herbicide use. Right now, the BLM treats about 300,000 acres annually using herbicides. So if Alternative A was selected, we would continue to treat about 300,000 annually.

The other treatment acres comprise about 1.7 million acres. So right now, the BLM treats about two million, of which 300,00 are using herbicides.

Under Alternative A, the BLM would also be able to continue using herbicides that are approved for use by the EPA that have been currently evaluated in earlier EISs done by the BLM. Right now, there are actually 20 chemicals that the BLM could use. Of those 20, realistically, only about 14 are used. There are six chemicals, including atrazine and fosamine, that have been used sparingly or not at all in the last six or seven years, so the BLM probably wouldn't use them, but under Alternative A, it still would be able to use those six if they wanted to, so, again, under Alternative A, the potential to use up to 20 herbicides.

Under Alternative B, which is the agency's preferred alternative, this allows for the expanded use of herbicides, expanded in the sense that we will be treating more acres. Under Alternative B, we are looking at 930,000 acres versus the current 300,000 acres. So, again, a three-fold increase in the use of herbicides. Overall, about six million acres, so, overall, a three-fold increase in the overall number of acres.

In addition, the BLM would be able to use those four new herbicides that we looked at earlier. They would also be able to treat vegetation using herbicides in 17 western states. Right now, they can only treat in four states. The three states that were not included in the earlier EISs were Texas, Nebraska, and Alaska. And although there really isn't much proposed to do in Alaska in the use of herbicides, they still would like to have the option to treat up there using herbicides as the need arose.

So, again, Alternative B, three times as many acres, three more states, four new chemicals. However, the other thing under Alternative B is, the BLM is going to restrict itself to only 14 of the 20 currently available herbicides. So, again, the atrazine and the fosamine -- and if you look in your little fact sheet there, it lists six different herbicides that would not be used unless at sometime in the future the BLM decides to conduct a detailed risk assessment for the six herbicides. For funding reasons, and also because they haven't used those herbicides in a number of years, it was decided it would not include those in the proposed alternative and worry about them in the future if there was ever a need to use

those herbicides.

Alternative C involves no use of herbicides. We actually looked at what would happen if you didn't use herbicides. It's pretty straight forward.

Alternative D involved no aerial spraying, so what would be the ramifications of treating vegetation if you couldn't spray it by air. Obviously, the potential for spray drifting off the treatment areas is much less if you are not using aerial spraying techniques.

And finally, the last one is Alternative E. And this was an alternative that was submitted to us by a coalition of environmental groups and has a number of different components to it of, which herbicides are only one portion of the proposal. And if you look in the EIS, either on the hard copy or the CD or website, it's one of the appendices, one of the last appendices in the document. It's basically a 30-page proposal. I suggest you read that to find out more about it.

But some of the things that -- or one of things in particular that they requested is that the BLM not use acetolactatsynthase-inhibiting herbicides. And these are basically herbicides that are fairly potent and can be troublesome if they drift off the treatment area,

especially if they drift into crop lands or nearby agricultural lands.

So they requested that the BLM not use these types of herbicides. Of the five that would be excluded, four of them are the ones the BLM currently uses or has available: Flursulfuron, Imasapyr, Metsulfuron Methyl, Sulfometuron Methyl are the four the BLM currently has available to use. They would not be allowed. And one of the four that is proposed for use is Imazapic. It also could not be used.

Some of you that have been with the BLM for many years, and maybe not even that many years, might ask, "Why do we even go to all the trouble? We've been treating vegetation for decades. There were earlier EISs done back in the '80s and early '90s."

That's true. However, there were several reasons why the BLM had to update these EISs and do a new EIS. First of all, the four EISs that were done in the late '80s and '90s, they had a little more regional focus. One was done specifically for California. And another one was done specifically for Western Oregon, another one for the Pacific Northwest, and another one that covered a fair chunk of land. It was a 13-state EIS that covered 13

states. But, again, it didn't cover all the states where BLM has surface lands.

Also, as I mentioned earlier, under the EISs, the BLM was only authorized to treat about 500,000. So that gives you an idea of what they were thinking back in the '80s and '90s, that 500,000 acres would be enough.

There has been subsequent legislation and policy directives that have allowed the BLM to treat another 1.5 million acres primarily for fire restoration activities. So between the ESIs and subsequent legislation policies, the BLM was able to treat about two million. Again, in their mind, and just looking around you, two million acres is not getting the job done. Fuel levels continue to rise, the weed population is continuing to grow. So they needed something that would enable them to treat more than the two million acres.

And, again, as can you see, we talked about it earlier, the three states that were not covered that have public land surface lands: Alaska, Nebraska, and Texas. Again, 81 million acres in Alaska, so that's especially important. And the earlier EISs did not, obviously, include the new herbicides we are looking at. And they did not develop a protocol that would have allowed the BLM to

evaluate new herbicides in the future. So that was an important process.

The Programmatic ER, and if you looked out front, you saw the four different documents. There were two volumes for the EIS. One is the main body. The second volume is mainly the appendices. There is an Environmental Report that is the main document, plus appendices, and there is actually a biological assessment that was done as part of both documents. So four documents. If you go to the CD, you will find a lot more documents that support those two.

The ER was designed basically to evaluate the other treatment methods. So what are the effects of using fire, prescribed fire? Manual, mechanical, and biological control methods. So what you would find in that document that you might not see as much of in the EIS is a discussion of what are the effects of using prescribed fire on air quality. The EIS talks about the effects of herbicides on air quality, but obviously, prescribed fire and smoke are a much bigger issue, so that gets a lot more coverage in the ER.

The other thing about the ER is, it's not making any decisions relating to nonherbicide treatment methods,

because no major decisions are being made through this document and EIS format was not required.

The other reasons we need to do the ER, not only to describe what's going on in the other treatment methods is, as part of the cumulative impact analysis for the EIS, we also had to look at the other treatment methods. And a good example is under Alternative C, where there is treatment using herbicides. So what are the effects of using other treatment methods if you don't use herbicides? Well, we really had no way of dealing with that issue unless somewhere we discussed what were the impacts from using the other treatment methods. That was done in the ER.

And as I mentioned, the Fish and Wildlife Service and NOAA, and National Marine Fishery Service worked closely with the BLM throughout this process. Their interest, obviously, what were the risks to plants and animals and humans. And that, obviously, had an important component in the EIS. But they also wanted to know, "Okay. If you use more or less herbicides and use more or less of the other methods, how is that going to effect threatened or endangered species?"

Again, part of the ER was to help them better

understand what would be the impacts of the other treatment methods on threatened and endangered species, as well as the use of herbicides. And if you look at the BA, there is a hard copy out front, the Biological Assessment, you will see there is quite a bit in the document for all the different species, of which there are about 350 different species in the Western U.S. that were looked at showing what are the effects of all the treatment methods, not just herbicides.

This graph shows you kind of the importance of the different methods. What I call the old EISs are kind of Alternative A, what percentage of acres treated using each method, currently. And then in the new EIS would be sort of the preferred alternative for the BLM and what might happen in the future.

One question you have is, how do we come up with the acres to begin with? Well, way back in 2001, looking into 2002, we actually went out to all the BLM field offices and asked them what were they planning to do in the next three years, zero to three years, and also from three to ten years out. And we sat at a table and actually asked them what types of vegetation they were going to treat, what types of methods, where would these treatments occur,

what would be the purpose of the method? A number of things to get a sense of what they saw coming down the pike in the next three years and in the next ten years. And that information was then used to develop the importance of the different methods, based on all the input from the different offices, and also the development of a number of about six million acres as to what they felt needed to be treated.

Based on that information, right now, the BLM you can see, the red and blue, the red is mechanical, the blue is prescribed fire. Very important. Right now, kind of a flip-flop. You can see mechanical becomes more important in the future under preferred alternative but both mechanical and fire will increase in importance. Still a one-two punch.

The other ones, the herbicide use actually holds pretty constant at 16 percent. And, again, this is a percentage of acres, not total number of acres.

Use of manual and biological methods actually declined under the preferred alternative. Keep in mind, however, though, that in terms of acres, it's a little different because we are treating three times as many acres. So, overall, the number of acres treated under all

five methods will increase compared to, we are treating three times as many acres.

Now, I pulled the numbers from Utah, and they are actually quite a bit different than what you see up here. And it's fun to go to each state and see how they vary. Right now, Utah treats almost half of its acres using mechanical treatment. Under the preferred alternative, Utah is proposing to treat almost three quarters of its acres using mechanical treatments. So western-wide, mechanical treatments are running 30 to 35 percent. Utah, right now, is at nearly 50 percent and plans to bump it up to about 75 percent.

Two other interesting ones, the use of herbicides. Right now, Utah is running about 16 percent. So they are kind of in-line with the rest of the Western U.S. Under the preferred alternative, they are going to drop down to about six percent of acres treated using herbicides. The use of herbicides will actually decline in Utah. And biological control, right now, Utah is about one percent of acres. And under the preferred alternative, again, it's less than one percent. So biological control won't be very important in this state. It is, however, let's say in California. They had a very high number.

They were 75 or 85 percent for biological control there, and it's also pretty important up in Montana.

So where do we go from here? Scoping meetings were held back in January and March 2002. And, of course, people say, "Boy, it's taken three-and-a-half years to get to this point." That's what we are all telling ourselves. But, again, a lot of it was the effort of the doing these risk assessments to evaluate the risks from these new herbicides and also 14 of the currently used herbicides. So that was big for us, and it took a number of years working with different agencies to come up with these risk assessments and also the protocol.

The draft EIS was issued to the public on November 10th. And it will be available for comment through January 9, 2006. We have a couple months there. The public comment meetings began for us on Monday. We started in Portland. Yesterday in Sacramento. Today in Salt Lake. And we'll be doing these public hearings for the next, well, basically through the 13th of this month. So another week-and-a-half.

The final EIS should be out sometime in the late spring of 2006. The public will have a chance to review that document, at least a 30-day review period. And

sometime in the late spring or summer that will be out for public review. And then it's hoped that the record of the decision, which the BLM will decide which, if any, alternative they would like to select, should occur sometime in the summer of 2006. Right now, they are shooting for the summer of 2006.

What can you do to help? Again, to me, the primary thrust of this meeting is to solicit your comments. They are very important to help us figure out flaws in the document and make corrections and figure out what could have been done better. That's why it's a draft, as somebody mentioned, as we found a little error earlier tonight.

So the first thing you need to do is review the documents. They've only been out for a couple of weeks now, two or three weeks now. So you've probably not had a chance to review them. There is, obviously, a lot to review. We have hard copies. If you really want a hard copy, speak with Brian. He has boxes and boxes his office in Nevada. I'm sure he'd love to send some out. The CDs are out front. If you would like a CD copy, it has all the documents on it. And, in fact, if you get a hard copy the CDs are in the back. You will need the CDs because you saw

how much is out front. There is probably that much and maybe twice as much written material on the CDs. All the risk assessments, for example, are on the CDs.

You can go to the BLM website and just type, www.blm.gov. It will take you right to the BLM website. It's the first link on the website, Vegetation EIS. And you go in there and the website has all the documents, and it's pretty well laid out so it's easy to find things. Or you can go to the BLM offices and they should have copies in their libraries that you can look at.

Once you've looked at the document, we'd appreciate it if you would provide your comments on issues you think that could have been better presented in the document or should have been presented or any alternative proposals that you think might be better than the ones that the BLM is looking at.

Out front, if you would like to write your comments, there is a form you can fill out. And you can either mail it in or fax it in. And the mail and fax information is on the bottom of the form. And, also, if you need the same information you can also look on this fact sheet handout.

The other thing that you could let us know, and

also use this same form, if you would like to be on the mailing list to get the final EIS release to know when it comes out so can you go to the website or get the CD, if you would like. So go ahead and send that out.

We had some people that said they thought they should have gotten the draft EIS, and we actually had a long mailing list and several months ago sent out a request for everybody on our mailing list to let us know if they wanted a hard copy, and only those people that responded got hard copies or CDs. So if you would like one for the final, let us know, and we will make sure you are on the list.

Where can you send your comments? As I mentioned, you can mail them to Brian. This is the address: Reno, Nevada. That's the Bureau of Land Management, P.O. Box 12000, Reno, Nevada 89520-0006. Or if you would like, you can fax them to Brian at 775-861-6712. Or you can e-mail them to Brian at vegeis@nv.blm.gov. If, for any reason, you have trouble with that e-mail address, try vegeis@blm.gov. But I think the vegeis@nv.blm.gov is working just fine.

So that's all I have. I'll turn it back over to Gina and the actual public comment portion of the hearing.

RAMOS: Okay. This concludes our presentation period, and I'd like to call the hearing to order. And unlike the open house that we had earlier, we will not be answering any questions. This is an opportunity for the public to provide formal comments as part of the record. If you have any comments that you would like to submit on the EIS or the Environmental Report, I'll invite you to come forward. If you do, if you would like to provide comments, you will have five minutes each to provide your comments. Please state your name, the organization that you represent, if any, and then if you have any other formal comments that you would like to submit for the record we'll be glad to take those, as well.

This is the third of a series of 10 hearings that we will be holding on the Environmental Impact Statement and the Environmental Report.

So do we have any members of the public that would like to step forward and provide comments at this time?

Last call. And that's fine.

If you have no oral comments that you'd like to submit at this time and would like to submit something either through e-mail, there is the e-mail address, or you

can fax them to Brian or mail them in. We will be accepting comments through January 9, 2006. And if you know of anyone that was unable to attend tonight and would like the same information, feel free to take a CD and a copy of the information with you.

We highly encourage comments and encourage the public to submit comments and to let us know if there is any information that we still need to include in the Environmental Impact Statement and in the Environmental Report. If there are no oral comments, then I will adjourn the hearing. Thank you.

(The hearing was adjourned at 7:32 p.m.)